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Commentary

# Sadness as Nobuo "Nankai" Nojiri Becomes a Buddha

by Alice Murata

It is a sad day when another Chicago Kibei passes away. On March 8, 2009 a day after Nobuo Nojiri fell, he died peacefully while enjoying a tasty omochi meal. Until then, he was relatively healthy.

On November 1, 1995, Nobuo Nojiri talked to me about his life which he was willing to have shared with others. Below is information gathered from that interview as well as from Wayne Maeda's book, *Changing Dreams and Treasured Memories: A Story of Japanese Americans in the Sacramento Region*, and his funeral service on March 15 at the Buddhist Temple of Chicago.

Nojiri's paternal grandparents were strawberry and grape farmers in California. When his father was ready to wed, he returned to Japan to get married. Nojiri was the chonan, first son, born on February 5, 1915. When

his grandparents returned to Japan they took Nojiri and his two younger sisters with them.

In Japan, the family owned land they leased to others to farm. Nojiri remembers his grandfather acted as a matchmaker between nice girls and men in America. His healthy, husky grandfather lost weight and died of cancer. His grandmother told him to go to America because he was born there. She wanted him to earn money and return to Japan and build her a new house. He laughingly said he did not fulfill that promise. Grandmother found a family going back to the United States to accompany Nojiri. In 1930, he was 15 years old and found America in a deep Depression when he returned.

According to Nojiri, people went to America to make money. He thinks it was a mistake that his father let his children go to Japan. He

thought people who kept children with them made more money because the kids could help farm. In his father's case he would pay others to pick strawberries. On top of that his father sent money to Japan to support households there. When he asked his grandmother for money, she had him write a letter to his father, who sent money every time for everything he wanted.

Nojiri's father "began as a small strawberry farmer and eventually owned his own shipping company, Nojiri and Company, which operated a produce house in Sacramento and a shipping terminal in Florin. According to one-time employee, as well as the Northern California Berry Grower's Association, Herb (Moon) Kurima: at this company's peak "there were perhaps as many as 80 to 100 farmers who shipped through Nojiri and Company. Mr. Nojiri was a very nice man,

and must have done pretty well because he had 8 or 9 trucks that delivered to local and Bay Area markets, as well as shipping strawberries to eastern markets. There were lots of farmers who had no money and would beg Nojiri for advances... he rarely turned farmers down."

Through hard work, with an adventurous spirit he was able to build a major fruit shipping company."

Without the shipping companies, many Japanese farmers could not have stayed in business. They needed timely loans and it was rough when they didn't make a profit all year. The shipping company provided the crucial link between the farmers and the market place. They were assured of having enough produce to ship the following season by advancing cash.

In Japan Nojiri completed grammar school and two years of high school. In California, he attended school for three years beginning with third grade English class and eighth grade arithmetic class.

After Nojiri returned to California, his father purchased 40 acres of farmland and a year later built a new house. If this was a cash purchase, life would be easy but ten percent was put down and the balance still had to be paid. In 1933, Nojiri's father got sick. Nojiri didn't know much about the family's financial matters. Up to that time, he did what his father requested. He thinks the poor health his endured maybe connected to the Depression. After his father died, Nojiri was responsible for the care of the family. Two brothers who were in Japan returned to help him. His older sister married soon after returning from Japan. The next sister remained in Japan.

Nojiri thought that women worked harder than the men.

When it rained the men went to a Sacramento boarding house and played hana and poker. My mother never went out. She stayed home washing and caring for kids. If she wanted anything, she asked husband to go get it.

According to Nojiri those with money could make money but if you didn't have money, you couldn't. He had to make contracts with the boss who made purchases for him and charged interest. He couldn't make purchases from the other sources which might have lower prices for materials he needed such as boxes. If strawberry prices were low, he couldn't repay the loan and still had to borrow for the following year's crops. Strawberries went to market once a year, so the balance of the time was spent working for others

Nojiri thought that Caucasians were jealous of Japanese because they worked hard and made money. "One family I know lived next to the grammar school. They had seventeen children but when I knew them they had eleven. A newspaper man from Sacramento Bee came, took picture and wrote down on paper everything. They helped to get money from government so they did pretty good. Those boys worked hard. Picked strawberry, picked grapes until school bell rings. Then they run." Caucasians "don't work like Japanese."

With war life got harder. A brother took Nojiri's place in the American Army. He had too much responsibility so his lawyer helped his brother take his place in the draft. The brother served in Oklahoma. Two more brothers served in the military. One was stationed in Germany after the war.

*t o be continued...*